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Dominika Dziurosz-Serafinowicz

Aquinas' concept of change and its consequences for corporeal creatures

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(Z. Herbert, *Trzy studia na temat realizmu*)

Dominika Dziurosz-Serafinowicz – (ur. 1984), absolwentka Wydziału Filozoficznego PAT z 2007 roku. Doktorantka UPJPII od roku 2012.

This paper is a presentation of Aquinas' concept of change (lat. *mutatio*) and its consequences for corporeal creatures (lat. *creatura corporali*). Within Thomas' philosophy, it can be proved that creatures are sentenced to unceasing change and cannot stop changing. That's why the very purpose of change – full actualisation – is never attainable. Creatures are imperfect beings, and *ex sui natura* cannot attain perfection. Such a vision can lead to a conviction that the world of corporeal creatures is absurd. A short solution to the problem of absurdity is given with the use of Aquinas' concept of participation.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the first section some basic limitations for the sake of this paper are made. In the second the concept of corporeal creatures is outlined. The third section analyses the definition of change. The fourth one presents various kinds of change. The next three are, respectively, proof of the creatures' unceasing change, impossibility of full actualisation, and imperfection. The last one is an abbreviated presentation of the concept of participation as a reply to the question of the world's absurdity.

The limitations of the paper

According to Saint Thomas, change is one of the subjects of natural science; it is its *obiectus formalis*. This idea is derived from Aristotle and

was well-known among mediaeval philosophers. Aquinas says: „Natural science studies natural things, things with an interior tendency to move and change”¹.

In this paper we only concentrate on physical changes, which means that we exclude immaterial things from our considerations: „But, as Aristotle says, wherever there is change there must be material change. So natural science is concerned with material, changing things”².

The conceptions of change and matter are considered within natural science (lat. *Scientia Naturali, Philosophia Naturali, Physica*): „Et quia omne, quod habet materiam mobile est, consequens est, quod ens mobile sit subiectum Naturalis Philosophiae”³.

Thus, anything that consists of matter changes (moves) and, in consequence, everything that changes is a subject of natural science. Therefore, we do not consider here such „changes” as creation, transmutation and annihilation. *In sensu stricto*, they are not changes, because: „For what is made by motion or by change is made from something pre-existing”⁴. Hence, for example, creation is not a real change, since it is *creatio ex nihilo* and requires neither matter, nor the existence of anything. It is necessary that: „Hence, when God creates, He produces things without motion”⁵. And further: „To create is, properly speaking, to cause or produce the being of things”⁶.

The word „change” in Aquinas’ philosophy has an extensive meaning and is sometimes ambiguous. It is both a metaphysical and a physical expression. It refers, *de facto*, to everything which is not God⁷. That is why in this paper we need to make some limitations and restrict our

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate*, Q.5, art.2, [in:] *Selected philosophical writings: Thomas Aquinas*, ed. T. McDermott, Oxford 1993, p. 14.

² Ibid., Q. 5, art. 2, p. 14.

³ Idem, *In octo libros de phisico auditu sive physicorum Aristotelis. Commentaria*, Lib. I, cap. 1, Napoli 1953, p. 14.

⁴ Idem, *Summa theologiae*, Q. XLV, art. 3, [in:] *Basic writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. A. C. Pegis, vol. 1, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1997, p. 437.

⁵ Ibid., Q. XLV, art. 3, p. 437.

⁶ Ibid., Q. XLV, art. 6, p. 442.

⁷ See idem, *Expositio...*, Q. V, art. 2, op. cit., p. 13.

research to physical, material changes which are related to the so-called corporeal creatures.

Description of corporeal creatures

Since we are considering natural things, we are considering creatures. Creatures are *products of nature*⁸. Creatures are entities which are being created, which are in the process of creation: „The creature is the term of creation as signifying change [...] is it necessary to say that a creature is being created during its entire existence”⁹;

Creatures are being created continually in the process of change. Nevertheless, they cannot create themselves, because nothing can create except for God. Contrary to Avicenna, Aquinas says: „So it is impossible for any creature to create, either by its own power, or instrumentally – that is, ministerially”¹⁰. It is so because no creature has the power to create being as being, God-power. Creatures can only operate on what has already been created, what has already been in being: „The operation of nature takes places only on the presupposition of created principles”¹¹. The universe of creatures is called the world or the natural world¹².

In this paper we want to tackle the question: what are the consequences of the definition of change for corporeal creatures? We know what creatures are, but we do not yet know what corporeal creatures are. Although all creatures belong to the natural world, not all belong to the natural material world. Not all creatures consist of matter. Let us see how a description of corporeal creatures is introduced by a Polish historian of mediaeval philosophy – Stefan Swieżawski: „If we want to take the position that is enforced by experience, that is, that there is a plurality of various, real things, we need to, according to Saint Thomas, accept that every being is

⁸ See idem, *Summa...*, Q. XLV, art. 8, op. cit., p. 445f.

⁹ Ibid. Q. XLV, art. 3, p. 438.

¹⁰ Ibid., Q. XLV, art. 5, p. 440.

¹¹ Ibid., Q. XLV, art. 8, p. 446.

¹² See ibid., Q. XLVI, art. 1, p. 447.

composed of potentiality and actuality”¹³. The general thesis is a presence of composition of *potentia et actus* in everything which is created. However, this is not sufficient for describing corporeal beings, *in concreto*:

[...] there is a composition on two levels in corporeal creatures. The first – more general – composition of essence and existence, the second, within essence itself, composition of potentiality and actualisation [...] Corporeal beings have, according to Saint Thomas, double composition. They are composed of essence and existence, and moreover their essence consists of the potentiality to be something extensive, this is of matter, and the actualisation of this potentiality, that is of form¹⁴.

Not everything contains matter. For example, angels are immaterial, although they are composed of potentiality and actuality¹⁵. This is Aquinas’ innovation, because classically potentiality was considered to be matter. The main difference between Aquinas and Avicenna is exactly this dilemma: whether there is a combination of matter and form in every being¹⁶. However, we must pay attention to Thomas, and according to him corporeal creatures are composed not only of potentiality and actuality, essence and existence, but also of matter and form, with emphasis on matter. And this is their specification. To sum up, we can say that corporeal creatures are entities being created continually and composed of a special kind of potentiality – matter – and its actualisation, form.

Definition of change

There are two most important things which describe any kind of change: the first is „actuality of potentiality” (gr. *entelecheia*), and the

¹³ S. Swieżawski, *Św. Tomasz na nowo odczytany*, transl. M. Dziurosz, Poznań 1995, p. 44.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 82f.

¹⁵ In *Summa theologiae*, Thomas says: „Although there is no composition of matter and form in an angel, yet there is act and potentiality” (Q. I, art. 2, op. cit., p. 484).

¹⁶ See J. Goheen, *The Problem of matter and form in De ente et essentia of Thomas Aquinas*, Harvard 1940.

second is „by something else” (lat. *ab alio*). We will consider these two components in detail.

Thomas takes the definition of change from Aristotle, as expressed in his *Physics*: „[...] the actuality of that which potentially is, *qua* such, is change”¹⁷. The expression *qua* means *in so far as* or, simply, *as*. According to Aristotle, we talk about change when we have two things: potentiality and actuality. But this does not suffice for defining change. We need a special kind of potentiality, as we can say, potentiality in so far as it is potentiality for a certain actualisation. To have something potentially means to have a strong possibility for it becoming actual if everything goes well. We must keep in mind that potentiality is not simple possibility. Possibility is „weaker” than potentiality. Potentiality is something that not only has a logical possibility to exist, but what exists in some way, but only potentially.

Change and becoming something else are strictly connected to potentiality. Thomas says: „Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality”¹⁸. The aim of change is to actualise something. However, change cannot actualise whatever just „wants to” actualise, but only what is in potentiality to a certain actualisation; in other words, what has the potential to become actual in a certain aspect. Saint Thomas says in *De Principis Naturae*: „You can't generate fire from any non-fire thing, but only from a non-fire thing open to being fire”¹⁹.

Creatures are not entities that can alter freely into any other creature. Their openness to change is limited to a certain scope of potentialities.

That was the first description of change. Let us see the second one: „Everything that is in the process of change has that change initiated in it by something else”²⁰. Let us investigate what it means. As we have seen,

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book III and IV, 201a10, transl. E. Hussey, Oxford 1993, p. 2. Other translations: „the fulfillment of what is potentially, as such, is motion” (Oxford translation), „the progress of realizing of potentiality, *qua* potentiality” (P. H. Wicksteed's and F. M. Cornford's translation).

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa...*, Q. IX, art. 1, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁹ Idem, *The Principle of nature*, [in:] *Thomas...*, op. cit., p. 70.

²⁰ Idem, *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Introductory reading*, ed. Ch. Martin, London–New York 1988, p. 60.

change is a process - a passage from potentiality to actuality. However, actualisation is not self-actualisation: its beginning depends on something else. As Christopher Martin comments: „[...] nothing can change from potentiality to actuality except by the influence of something which is in actuality”²¹. It is important that this „something else” cannot be anything, but it must be something actual. This has immense consequences for the corporeal world. Namely: „[...] in material things it is always one part that initiates a change in another part. There are, then, no initiators of their own change in the chief or principal sense in the material world”²². Thus, although there are all sorts of changes in the material world, the material world has not enough power to initiate them. Change in the material world demands something „not of this world”; the material world is not sufficient to explain where indeed the change comes from. What is required to explain why some change in the material world really proceeds is to cite the efficient cause. It is so because Thomas, as Aristotle’s student, places the considerations about change in a schema of four causes. In the *Principles of Natures* we can read: „So besides matter and form there must be the efficient cause or mover or agent, from which the change originates”²³.

Having a complete system of four causes, we need one more cause – a goal. The goal is special: „[...] is called the causes of causes: because it causes the causality of the other causes”²⁴. Change which is originated by the efficient cause is blind without its purpose. And so there is a need of some guide, which is the goal. And: „The final cause is the answer to the question «why» something exists or occurs; the agent or efficient cause is the maker or producer of the change; the material cause is that out of which the change comes; and the formal cause is the specifying factor in any event or existent”²⁵.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 61.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *The Principle...*, op. cit., p. 72.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁵ V. J. Bourke, *Thomas Aquinas*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 9, ed. D. M. Borchert, Detroit–New York–San Francisco–San Diego–New Haven, Conn. – Waterville, Maine–London–Munich 2006, p. 428.

For a better and deeper understanding of what change is, we need to recognise the various types of change.

Kinds of change

According to Salamucha²⁶, Thomas basically divides physical changes into substantial (lat. *substantialis*) and accidental (lat. *accidentalis*). Substantial changes are divided into two: generation (lat. *generatio*) and corruption (lat. *corruptio*). Within accidental changes there are instant (lat. *instantanea*) and gradual (lat. *successiva*) changes. Accidental generation and accidental corruption belong to accidental instant changes, and changes: in place (lat. *latio*), quantitative (lat. *augmentatio*), qualitative (lat. *alteratio*) belong to gradual accidental change.

In this section we would like to answer the question what these many kinds of changes have in common and what they are in general. In *Summa Theologiae* Thomas says: „For change means that the same thing should be different now from what it was previously”²⁷. Change introduces a difference into a thing. The thing „after” change must be different. Nevertheless, we can talk about change only if this change is founded on the same thing. Every change needs some ground which will be in the process of change. So, in a changing thing we have two important elements: something which is the same during the process of change and something which is different²⁸. And now: „Basically, prime matter is that which remains constant and provides continuity during a change from one substance to another”²⁹. When we consider substantial change, the subject of change is prime matter. When the subject of change is a substance, we talk about accidental change: „[...] changes

²⁶ See J. Salamucha, *The proof ex motu for the existence of God: Logical Analysis of St. Thomas' Arguments*, [in:] *Aquinas: A collection of critical essays*, ed. A. Kenny, Notre Dame, Ind. 1976, p. 187.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa...*, Q. XLV, art. 2, op. cit., p. 436.

²⁸ Here is a space for the problem of identity. What kind of change effects the loss of a thing's identity and what makes the thing remain itself?

²⁹ V. J. Bourke, *Thomas Aquinas*, op. cit., p. 427.

in which a substance is the subject, in which a substance changes as regards some accident it has"³⁰, as Martin clarifies.

During both substantial and accidental change something must be the subject of change. However, in substantial change this is prime matter, and in accidental - the substance. At this point we need to recall Martin's comment:

People often talk as if the accidents were that which can change, and the substance that which does not change: this is very alien to the manner of speaking of Aristotle and Aquinas. For them, it is precisely the substance that changes, that is the subject of change: the accidents do not change at all, strictly speaking: they merely (in some sense) cease to exist and come into existence³¹.

So in fact, the subject of change changes; and in accidental change the substance changes, not the accidents. The accidents just appear and disappear. In substantial change the prime matter changes and the substances just generate and corrupt.

Now, when we have introduced all the basic elements necessary for our purposes, to wit, definition and types of change and description of corporeal creatures, we can proceed with our argumentation and present some simple proofs of creatures' unceasing change, unactualisability and imperfection.

Proof of creatures' unceasing change

The proof of creatures' unceasing change is trivial. Namely, if we combine the definition of change and statements about the construction of a corporeal creature, we will obtain proof of corporeal creatures' un- cease-ability in change. Let us see how the argument runs. Since (1) change is defined as actualisation of potentiality, (2) corporeal creatures are necessarily constructed of matter, (3) having matter implies having potentiality, (4) there exists something which is in actuality, corporeal

³⁰ Ch. Martin, *The Philosophy of Thomas...*, op. cit., p. 65.

³¹ Ibid., p. 63.

creatures must change. Whereas every corporeal creature has potentiality, every corporeal creature is necessarily changing, for change is transition from potentiality to actuality. In other words, due to having matter corporeal creatures are always „ready” to change, and as soon as an occasion occurs (as soon as they encounter something which initiates change) – they will change. Corporeal creatures containing matter are unceasingly changeable entities, are always in disposition to change. Moreover, a corporeal creature – in order to be itself – must contain matter and potentiality, so it must change unceasingly. Of course, the basic premise for this argument is that there exists something in actuality.

We can prove this from another perspective: only what is in pure actuality and does not have anything in potency is unchangeable, and so is God. Everything else that has something – anything – in potency must change, is condemned to change. Thus corporeal creatures, necessarily containing matter as a kind of potentiality, always have something in potentiality – they are not pure actuality. If they are not pure actuality, they are not unchangeable, so they are changeable. And because they must contain matter, they are always changeable – they change unceasingly.

Now the questions arise: is there any possibility for corporeal creatures not to change? Can they stop changing? Is there no other possibility? No, because everything that is material is potential. And as long as something is in potentiality, it is changeable. And so corporeal creatures do not have an alternative – as long as they exist, they change unceasingly. So Saint Thomas claims not only that if something is in change, it is in potentiality, but also that what is in potentiality, is in change. So, if anything is in any potency, it must change. And as long as creatures are constructed as material, they cannot stop changing.

Proof that creatures are not fully actualisable

When we proved, in the spirit of Aquinas, corporeal creatures' unceasing change, we also proved that a corporeal creature cannot achieve full actualisation. Namely, if corporeal creatures achieved full actualisation, they would stop changing, since actualisation is a purpose and so

an end of change, but, as we have proved, they cannot stop changing; *ergo* they can never achieve full actualisation. Creatures can never be in full actuality, because they are in a perpetual process of change, so in a perpetual process of actualisation. The process of actualisation is unceasing, so there is no end to it. Therefore full actualisation is unattainable and corporeal creatures cannot be fully actualised.

Proving this from a different angle, we can argue as follows. (1) Full actualisation is a lack of potentiality. (2) Each corporeal creature contains matter. (3) Possessing matter implies having potentiality. Therefore corporeal creatures are not fully actualised. As long as creatures are material, they are potential; as long as they are potential, they are not fully actual. Because they must be material, they cannot be fully actual, so they are unactualisable fully – they cannot achieve full actualisation.

In fact, creatures change, but they never achieve the purpose of change – full actualisation – because they must change all the time. Full actualisation is something that they approach, but never attain. It is some kind of approximation, but not attainment. It is so because they cannot, as corporeal creatures, get rid of the body. The reason for this is that if they got rid of the body, they would not be corporeal creatures any more. They are always not-fully-actualised, they always lack something. One can say that creatures are insatiable – always. *Ex nature* they are condemned to attempts of achieving something that is unachievable. One can say that corporeal creatures are absurd. Simply, the creatures' inner construction makes them absurd. The necessary content of matter as well as the necessary content of potentiality and the desire to become fully actual combine together to create the absurdity of corporeal creatures. Corporeal creatures exist in order to attain something that is, because of their construction, unattainable.

Proof of the imperfection of creatures

Let us start with Aquinas' words: „Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect, for all desire their own perfection. But

everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it is being"³².

Saint Thomas associates perfection with actuality and being. In fact, for him perfection is identical with being and actuality. For our proof of creatures' imperfection we just need to say that as long as a creature is corporeal, it is *ipso facto* in potentiality. And as long as it is in potentiality, is not in actuality. As long as it is not actual, is not perfect. Q.E.D.

Proving this in a different manner, we can reason this way: because (1) corporeal creatures are unactualisable, as we have seen in section 6, and (2) perfection is actuality, corporeal creatures are unable to be perfect, and so they are imperfect.

On the other hand, the creatures' imperfection is obvious, since the only perfect being is God: „[...] no creature perfectly represents the first exemplar, which is the divine essence"³³;

At this point, it seems that Thomas Aquinas' account is more similar to the Platonic than the Aristotelian view. This is not very surprising for Thomas' whole system is founded on the perfect God. As a consequence of such a metaphysical vision there is nothing left for corporeal creatures but a strong and unsatisfied desire for perfection: „[...] every nature desires its own being and its own perfection"³⁴. Again, we discover something absurd in creatures. Their insatiable desires to become perfect make them absurd. In the process of change, they try to reach perfection which they are unable to reach. All their attempts are necessarily unsuccessful. Corporeal creatures trying to achieve something which is unachievable appear to be absurd.

Now we have to ask the questions: are these three proofs also proofs of the absurdity of the world? And is there any way out from this supposed absurdity for corporeal creatures? It seems that Thomas' reply to this problem is the concept of participation.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa...*, Q. V, art. 1, op. cit., p. 42.

³³ Ibid., Q. XLVII, art. 2, p. 460.

³⁴ Ibid., Q. XLVIII, art. 1, p. 465.

The concept of participation as a solution to the problem of the absurdity of the world

Considering the set questions, we need to bear in mind that Thomas' system is holistic and understanding it fully is possible only if we acquire the proper perspective. And now, the world as a whole can never be imperfect or absurd for Aquinas, since: „[...] the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any given single creature”³⁵. Though particular creatures are imperfect, actual only in some aspects and changeable, they do participate in the divine and, one can say, emergent perfection: „It is the part of the best cause to produce an effect which is best as a whole, but this does not mean that He makes every part of the whole the best absolutely, but in proportion to the whole”³⁶. The concept of participation introduces a different perspective – more general and embracing creatures from a „higher” level. However, to gain adequate understanding, we should interpret participation in a certain way. It seems that we cannot understand it as H. P. Kainz proposes:

[...] „participation”, we will see that it is at the same time both an affirmation and a negation: an affirmation, in so far as it designates a certain degree of positive actuality which is possessed; but a negation, in so far as it implies that there is some chasm – be it relatively great or small – between the perfection of the participant and unparticipated act”³⁷.

It is self-evident that no creature is everything and each of them can only exist in a limited way – participate only in a part of the world. Nevertheless this does not mean that this is something negative. We should not talk about participation in a category of negation. Creatures existing do not negate what they do not participate in – they do not negate the „unparticipated act”. It seems that Aquinas teaches us a positive way of thinking rather than a negative one. It is similar with God. We

³⁵ Ibid., Q. XLVII, art. 1, p. 459.

³⁶ Ibid., Q. XLVII, art. 2, p. 461.

³⁷ H. P. Kainz, „*Active and Passive Potency*” in *Thomistic Angelology*, The Hague 1972, p. 33.

cannot think about God and the world in two radically different manners. It is exactly the concept of participation which was supposed to fill the „chasm” between one entity and another, between God and creation. The concept of participation serves as a link and a reconciliation between mistakenly supposed oppositions. To understand it better, it is advisable not to think in two categories of negation and affirmation (*resp.* potentiality and actuality, possibility and reality). It seems that if we understand creation as an opposition to the perfect God, we will not be able to defend the world from absurdity. It is better to think about participation in a way shortly presented by Antony Kenny: „To participate, Aquinas tells us, is to have a share of”³⁸. Creatures participate in being – they have a share of divinity. Kenny says: „So they do not lack being, as such; they are not nonentities”³⁹. The concept of participation is a praise for being, not a complaint about its organisation and limitation. For Thomas, the world of creatures is not imperfect, badly-constructed and always-lacking, but it is a world of beings who participate in actuality, perfection and thus divinity.

To make this inversion of thinking more understandable, at this point I would like to make a short remark using a quotation from Emeric Coreth: „Nicht die Wirklichkeit setzt Möglichkeit voraus, sondern Möglichkeit setzt Wirklichkeit voraus”⁴⁰. So, it is not reality that presupposes possibility, but it is possibility that presupposes reality. It seems that the realistic („actualistic”) view allows us to understand Saint Thomas' vision of the world better. From this standpoint it is advised to consider potentiality (which seems the most troublesome and problematic) from the perspective of actuality. From this viewpoint there only exists what is actual, while potentiality serves just as a figure that helps us to explain the reorganisation of the world's appearance. That is why change alone is not a desperate run of absurdity, but a way of talking about the world that we try to understand. The permanent change

³⁸ A. Kenny, *Aquinas on Being*, Oxford 2002, p. 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁴⁰ E. Coreth, *Grundriss der Metaphysik*, Innsbruck–Wien 1994, p. 83f.

of creatures is a sign of the world's multiplicity, variety and richness, not the proof of its absurdity.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented elegant proofs of corporeal creatures' perpetual change, unactualisability and imperfection which are in accord with Aquinas' philosophy. These three things are logical consequences of the definitions of change and corporeal creatures. Some philosophers could claim that such an organisation of the world introduces absurdity. A proposal of a solution to this problem has been presented in the shape of Aquinas' concept of participation.

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